Enhancing Oral Skills: A Practical and Systematic Approach

Dennis Wilhoit
Yanbian University, Yanji City

The goal of this article is to introduce the main features of an approach the author has used in teaching oral skills to first-year university English majors in China. Its two most prominent features are that it is both practical and systematic.

What sets it apart as a "practical" approach? In recent years we have seen the emergence of several diverse teaching methodologies. Each one is attracting practitioners who often contend that their particular technique is superior, to the exclusion of the others. However, despite the claims of these proponents, no single methodology adequately addresses the needs of all English-language students. On the contrary, evidence gained from practical experience strongly suggests that the strong points of a variety of methodologies, if skillfully combined, can complement one another, together forming a cohesive, realistic, and highly motivational teaching strategy. For instance, it can be demonstrated that the Total Physical Response method (TPR) (Asher 1986:3–19) can be effectively integrated with certain elements drawn from the Natural Approach (Krashen and Terrell 1983:75–7). The enthusiastic response of my students and their accelerated skills development indicate that this particular combination of varied methodologies is a practical approach well suited to student needs in China. In reality much of it bears a close resemblance to interactive language teaching (Rivers 1987:vii–xvi, 3–15; Bygate 1987:67–93).

Figure 1 embodies the essence of this teaching approach and careful examination of this chart should substantiate the second claim that it is indeed "systematic."

Class activities

In general, Figure 1 provides a schematic representation of class activities, which collectively represent a broad spectrum of formal teaching methodologies. These activities are subdivided into four categories which together form a step-by-step progression beginning with "A," continuing through "B" and "C," and finishing with "D." Moreover, each category has the characteristic of being either "accuracy" or "fluency" oriented, while simultaneously being either "teacher" or "student" controlled.

"Teacher-controlled" activities generally involve the whole class with the teacher playing a pivotal role analogous to a conductor of a symphony or that of stimulator. "Student-directed" activities are done in pairs or small groups with the teacher playing the more passive role of organizer or consultant.

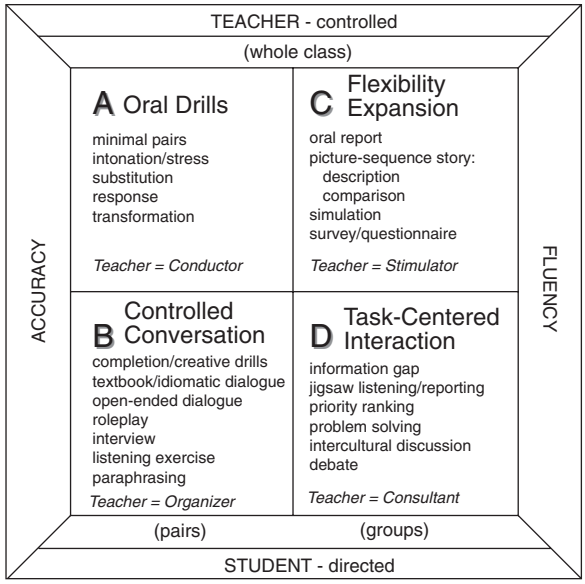

Figure 1

Skills training vs. knowledge acquisition

Teaching oral communication is teaching a skill! As such, the appropriate teaching style differs fundamentally from that required by many other disciplines where acquiring knowledge is the primary objective. In other words, the slogan should be "Teach the language, not [only] about the language" (Moulton 1961:88). In order to properly develop this communication skill the students must be active. Furthermore, they need to think in the target language. In order to accomplish these goals they need dynamic task-centered activities designed to generate student interest while all but eliminating the translation step. In the traditional grammar-translation method the teacher tends to monopolize class time speaking in the native language, while students passively listen—and languish.

As the correct "mixture" or balance of activities is achieved, proper emphasis can be devoted to the overall needs of the students at any given level. For example, at the elementary level, it is recommended that the priority for class time be on accuracy-oriented activities (categories "A" and "B"), whereas for intermediate and advanced levels the emphasis should be on fluency-oriented activities (categories "C" and "D").

A. Oral drill techniques. Presentation of these techniques consists of using sets of full-sized (80 cm x 110 cm) flip charts that include the use of minimal-pair drills (sets of two words that differ only in one consonant or vowel sound) (Trager and Henderson 1956); model sentences complete with intonation graphs for repetition purposes (Clarey and Dixon 1985); and large reproductions of illustrations clearly showing tongue, mouth, and jaw positions as well as where the sound originates (Baker 1982). Sequencing of these charts can then be coordinated with whichever textbook dialogue happens to be the focus of study for the day.

Once a brief session of pronunciation drill practice is completed, mastery of the dialogue itself can be followed up with a brief, brisk, oral-drill routine: backward buildup[1] (where applicable), substitution, response, and transformation drills.

As far as the selection of an appropriate textbook is concerned, as long as the level of the vocabulary base is suitable, almost any textbook can be adapted to meet the needs of a given classroom situation. After all, it isn't so much the textbook as how it is taught that matters—and even with an ideal textbook, supplemental materials are a must for successful lessons. Of course, this is not to say that the type of textbook used is irrelevant, but rather to affirm that in cases where budgetary constraints or departmental regulations prevent selection of ideal ESL teaching materials, improvisation is still possible.

B. Controlled conversation. Even after working with minimal-pair drills to improve pronunciation as well as with the other drill techniques, a great gulf remains between the ability to accurately parrot a textbook dialogue and to engage in free expression on the topic of that dialogue. How, then, can this gulf be successfully spanned? The answer lies in providing some crucial stepping stones that lie beyond the commonly practiced drill techniques of the audiolingual method (listed above). These are known as completion and creative drills and employ the use of classroom realia and roleplay.

The first step beyond the obvious substitutions suggested by the dialogue interchange requires the use of open-ended dialogues. These usually consist of four-line adaptations of the original dialogues which retain the basic format (of key elements only) while replacing the remainder with lines drawn in to represent whole phrases or sentences to be supplied by the student. When coupled with visual aids (for instance, maps or pictures) the language interchange can be shifted to a new, more dynamic context while leaving the relative security of the original format in place.

Once this has been practiced a few times, however, the open-ended dialogue crutch can be removed and gradually more creative and realistic situations introduced to wean the students away from the rigid structural formality of the

1. Backward buildup involves dividing a long sentence into phrases, then reconstructing it starting with the last phrase, building backward to the start of the sentence. The students repeat each phrase until they can repeat the complete reconstituted sentence.

original text. Active roleplay and TPR exercises further reinforce this first stage of flexibility and promote development beyond it. From this point the remaining distance to spontaneous communicative interaction among students is not so great, and the subsequent teaching relates subject matter to the real-life experiences of the students.

Whenever it becomes obvious that the majority of the students in a class are weak in any basic usage that directly influences the quality of oral production, a few minutes of class time can profitably be spent on that point. The deductive, rule-learning cognitive code approach can serve in teaching the oral skills as long as exercises are oral and not written. Excellent sources of such exercises are available (see Azar 1985) and in the lesson plans for four hours of instruction, one session of 15 minutes duration is usually adequate. If, on the other hand, the structured, inductive, problem-solving aspects of the Silent Way better suit the needs of the lesson, innovative alternatives to the abovementioned exercises also exist (see Rinvolucri 1984).

After having helped the students master all aspects of the textbook content in a controlled environment on the accuracy side of oral production, the emphasis then shifts to creating conditions that will promote maximum development on the fluency side.

C. Flexibility expansion. Periodic oral reports are a means of consolidating vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, and patterns already covered in the process of studying about a topic in the textbook. However, in order to supply additional vocabulary and relevant cultural background knowledge of the topic (especially when it deals with a foreign setting or with content that lies beyond the students' personal experiences), it is often useful to provide them with picture-story sequences. Ideally, these should be a series of pictures that tell a story without the aid of any written words. At the very least these pictures should contain nothing of the students' native language. The theoretical basis for this stipulation harks back to the Direct Method, where the purpose is to encourage the student to think directly in the target language without any need for translation, thereby eliminating a step that retards the development of fluency (Richards and Rodgers 1986:10). Experience with the technique supports this hypothesis and in the bibliography I list two texts admirably suited to this purpose. (See Takahashi and Frauman-Prickel 1985 and Winn-Bell Olsen 1984.)

D. Task-centered interaction. Numerous strategies exist for meaningful and successful student-directed discussions. Here the word "discussion" is used rather broadly to include anything from the simplest question-answer guessing process, through simulation of realistic situations and problem solving, to the most complex debates (Ur 1981:2).

Activities in this category share the distinction of being grounded either in extensions of the Natural Approach (Richard-Amato 1988:83–111) or in the communicative approach, where a functional syllabus is followed, authentic teaching aids are used, and three distinguishing features are ever present: information gap, choice, and feedback (Richards and Rodgers 1986:64–83).

Information-gap exercises are an example of a problem-solving task where each member of the group is exclusively in possession of certain bits of information that can only be gained from one another through verbal communication (Harmer 1983:43). One of the many adaptations of this teaching strategy is the "jigsaw story," where each of the members of a small group see only one of a series of pictures which together tell a story. It is only as each member accurately describes in words the picture seen—and only as the members attentively listen to each other!—that collectively they can determine the proper sequence of the pictures and ultimately reconstruct the original story. Given a time limit and pitted against rival groups within the classroom, not only a lively atmosphere but also one productive from a fluency-development standpoint can be created.

At the intermediate level, an intercultural problem can be introduced occasionally to challenge the class to think and reason with each other in English. Three or more possible solutions to the problem can then be proposed, and the class asked to divide up into pre-designated small groups for discussion purposes. The discussion itself can center around reasons for choosing a particular solution in the foreign cultural setting or, alternatively, in the native setting (Kasser and Silverman 1981:1).

At more advanced levels, activities combining elements of brainstorming and classification, and often consisting of multiple stages of interaction, are also possible (Ur 1981:98). Activities of this nature may include elaborate simulations, classroom debates, panel discussions, planning projects, etc.

The "week-at-a-glance" lesson plan

Conversation classes for first-year English majors usually meet twice weekly for a total of four hours. Many textbooks are compiled with this in mind, consisting of 15 or 16 units/topics, or just enough for one semester's workload. It was in accordance with this time frame that the model "Week-at-a-Glance" Lesson Plan shown in Figure 2 was designed. However, as long as the basic class activity sequence "A" through "D" is not altered, the planning format can be modified to cover the lesson content in more than two 2-hour sessions.

Here again the comprehensive features of this flexible lesson plan reflect both the "practical" and "systematic" aspects of the teaching approach:

• *Balance and continuity.* "At a glance" it is obvious whether or not there is a proper balance between accuracy- and fluency-oriented activities—as dictated by the stated objective of that particular session recorded in the bottom left-hand corner. Generally, accuracy is the focus of the first session, so most of the activities planned should appear on the left side. Conversely, since fluency is the focus of the second session, the majority of activities planned for that session should appear on the right side. Throughout the course the teacher should try to satisfy this basic planning condition.

• *Variety and programming.* For the sake of frequently providing a change of pace—an important factor in student motivation—at least three or four activities should be planned for each 50-minute period, with drill-work sessions kept brief and lively. It is always better to plan more activities than can be used rather than too few. Appropriate programming notations can be made in the fourth column of this planning worksheet to serve as a guide to follow during the class.

• *Language laboratory and OHP.* Provided that a tape for the textbook can be either purchased or prepared, it is good if all of the textbook lesson content can be rehearsed in the language laboratory rather than in the classroom. By relegating much of the necessary drill work to the laboratory in this way, the teacher is free to concentrate on a single represen-

WEEK-AT-A-GLANCE LESSON PLAN: Class of 1993 English Oral Skills Development Course, Fall Semester 1993

LESSON: TITLE/TOPIC:

Day	Date	Hr.	Class Segment (min.)	ACCURACY ACTIVITIES: Pronunciation Listening	ACCURACY ACTIVITIES: General	ACCURACY ACTIVITIES: Idioms Dialogues	Audiovisual aids/materials	FLUENCY ACTIVITIES: Pair Work	FLUENCY ACTIVITIES: Group Work	Teaching Evaluation
I	1993	1	① 10 ② 10 ③ 10 ④ 20 ⌐	② pronunciation drills - 2 types (correlated with textbook dialogue)	③ oral drills - 5 types (with textbook dialogues)	① textbook dialogue(s) - rehearse/expand ④ ⌐	charts			Were the activities effective?
		2	① 5 ⌐ ② 10-20 ③ 10-20 * (20) ④ 5		* oral grammar exercise (*optional*) ④ collect 5 notebooks (at random) and assign homework	① ⌐ idiomatic dialogue ②open-ended dialogue and roleplay	cartoon series hand out chart realia (objects, maps, etc.) posters	③ picture story (TPR exercise) *interview (*optional*)	*simulation (*optional*) or survey/ questionnaire (*optional*)	Suggested changes:
II	1993	1	① 5 ② 5 * (10) ③ 10 ④ 20-30	* story (listening comprehension + paraphrasing exercise - *optional*)		① review: question-answer ② review: with open-ended dialogue	realia (ads, signs, lists, memos, forms, tickets, graphs, newspapers, magazines, brochures, sketches, etc.)	③ review picture story	④ information-gap exercise (jigsaw story) or problem solving	Suggested follow-up work:
		2	① 10 ② 15 ③ 20 ④ 5		② oral report (individuals selected at random) ④collect 5 notebooks (at random) and assign homework		chart	① rehearsal: oral report	③ priority ranking or discussion (intercultural) or debate	Were the objectives achieved?

Day I OBJECTIVES Day II		LANGUAGE LAB	Day I HOMEWORK (due on . . .) Day II	
* mastery of new terms (including idioms) * emphasis on accuracy	* emphasis on expanded flexibility and fluency * cumulative review of past lessons	tape of textbook tape for transparencies (OHP)	* record/learn all new lesson vocabulary and idioms * orally practice variations on dialogues with classmate	* prepare oral report outline on topic of lesson (to hand in) * write mini-dialogues using new idioms

Figure 2

tative dialogue and enlarge upon it to the point of eliciting free speech. On the worksheet, space is provided for scheduling and related activities. Generally, for a class meeting for four hours per week, the scheduling of one additional hour of laboratory work per week provides sufficient drill practice.

• *Notebook and homework.* Although writing exercises play only a peripheral role in reinforcement, mastery of vocabulary and idiomatic expressions as well as preparation of outlines for oral reports are essential to daily class participation. Therefore, it is recommended that each student have a notebook dedicated to those purposes. Also, in order to encourage students to feel the responsibility of always being prepared, the practice of "random selection" of five of their notebooks at the end of each class proves effective. To be absolutely impartial and even-handed, however, the teacher must keep careful records! Another tip: Experience has shown that having the students leave the back side of each notebook page blank is also a good practice, because once corrections have been made by the teacher, the students can use the space on the page adjacent to the error for re-writing that portion. In this way learning is reinforced.

• *Audiovisual aids checklist.* Teaching aids are central to task-centered oral skills training classes, so the middle column has obvious practical value: a quick glance at this checklist just before leaving for class can forestall the frustration of arriving at the classroom ill-equipped to accomplish the objectives of the day's lesson plan.

• *Teaching evaluation.* On the far right side is a column for self-evaluation immediately following each class. Pertinent comments recorded here can prove invaluable not only as an effective means of self-improvement, but also as a reference source to keep on file to aid in the preparation of teaching plans for the same lesson at a future date.

Conclusion

The eclectic approach outlined in this article channels and develops the cre-

ativity of both student and teacher, resulting in more productive class time. It is proposed as a viable alternative not only to traditional methods, which have fallen into disfavor, but also to the unfocused objectives, uncoordinated techniques, and unpredictable side-effects of an "experiment-as-you-go" approach. After all, the quality of the future professional careers of many promising young men and women is at risk!

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Dennis Wilhoit *has been working as a foreign teacher in the English Department of Yanbian University, China, for the past four years. He specializes in the syllabus design of first- and second-year oral skills courses.*